1:Sanders Z-5,4 (1952-1959) 1962 EH1 Greece EH1

Attitudes and Beliefs about Nature

The Greek people, as one would expect of individuals everywhere, vary considerably in their attitude toward the physical environment.[3] Some, completely oblivious to the beauty about them, nevertheless try to read the weather signs in order to know when they should plow or sow. Some, at the other extreme, show a deep sensitivity to the changing moods of nature, as, for example, the illiterate shepherd in the Boeotian village of Schematari who would take pencil and paper and lovingly draw a tree-filled landscape or the rising sun. Most of the Greek villagers, however, seem to fall between these two extremes; from time to time they, in the words of one peasant, "gain an optimism in life when they see the beauty of a nice slope of the mountain or a lovely dawn." On the whole, the world seems a friendly place and there are few things to fear at the hands of nature.

More than this, the world is in God's hands. The frequent reference to God in popular speech may be a cultural trait handed down from generation to generation, but some of the oft-repeated, time-honored phrases are said with such animation and with such a light in the eye that they must express the individual feeling of those using them. There is no counterpart in English to the common phrase *Chara Theou* (Joy of God), which combines not only rapture and active enjoyment but the sense of the sparkling light God sheds on the earth. During the spectacular Greek spring, this phrase is a most appropriate way of describing one's feeling.

Even those who are not very conscious of their natural surroundings from day to day miss them deeply when distant from them. Over and over again, returned emigrants in Greek villages gave as the reason for their departure from America their need to see the mountains or plains or the sea on which their eyes had rested while they grew up.

Much of this feeling toward nature is based on the sense of intimacy with her.[4] Indeed, one of the first requirements in trying to understand the life of any people is to learn their reaction and adjustment to the natural world. The Greek farmer studies nature for important signs which tell him whether to bring the flock in from the high hillside, whether to start or delay a journey, whether to put out his tobacco plants. Those signs directly relating weather to agriculture are obvious and easily understood by the Westerner, if not always accepted as scientifically valid. But the signs which natural objects and events provide of the supernatural — illness and death, the appearance of ghosts, or even the way the universe was made and is run — all of these stretch the imagination of the scientifically trained specialist, who may be inclined to dismiss them as superstition and therefore unimportant. Nevertheless, they continue to be important to many Greek villagers, young and old alike.

In listening to folk interpretations of nature, one also learns much about

1:Sanders Z-5,N (1952-1959) 1962 EH1 Greece EH1

the people's attitudes. One must not venture under trees when there is lightning or go to sleep during the day under a walnut tree with its thick foliage (in Central and Southern Greece) or under a fig tree (farther south). A young woman from the Peloponnesos explained that Christ was sitting under a fig tree when he was taken, thus accounting, in her mind at least, for this taboo. As we shall soon see, the idea of fate, destiny, or necessity is strong today, as it was in classical Greece. Natural phenomena are important in helping one learn what is to come or in helping to ward off some impending evil or difficulty.

Plants to some extent aid in knowing what lies ahead. However, most of the blossoms, fragile and fragrant, appear for such a short period in the spring that they are enjoyed primarily for their beauty. Fruit trees in bloom are looked upon as a glorious miracle of color, and one is urged to go out of the way just to see a particularly beautiful tree, especially an almond tree in January. But there are some plants that are appreciated for more than their beauty.

In many parts of Greece belief in the good luck brought by a four-leafed clover is strong. No bullet can affect it, as shown by the following folk story:

> Once there was a man who had a silver tobacco case on which he had stuck a four-leafed clover. They put it up as a target and shot bullet after bullet but could not hit it. Afterwards they took away the clover and the case was easily pierced.

If a peasant from Northern Greece comes upon a form of the peony known as "The Holy Virgin's Hand" (*Tes Panagias to cheri*), he may remember that sprigs of it are thrown into the jug from which the water is poured for a woman in travail.[8] The name just as much as the properties of the herb is supposed to relieve the pains of labor. After the birth, the midwife is apt to hang cloves of garlic on the mother and the baby to ward off the Evil Eye. Garlic is so powerful against evil that, when one fears that an envious person will cast a spell upon the animal or baby or any other object of envy, one should say *skortha sta matia sou* (garlic in your eyes).

Anemones, hyacinths, basil, and thyme,[9] as well as the olive tree, the laurel, or the cypress, have stories associated with them which the old people tell to the children. Thus, nature seems intimate since so much of its handiwork carries deep and traditional meaning for the villager.

Animals have an even more special meaning. Both the occasional wild animal and the domestic animals reveal what to expect in the way of catastrophe or changing weather. For example, a man plowing in Central Greece may see a horsefly rest on someone and read into that simple occurrence the coming of a guest. If a person from the island of Spetsai catches a

1:Sanders Z-5/4 (1952-1959) 1962 EH1 Greece EH1

horsefly, he will put it in his wallet for good luck. Or if he is returning from the field and sees two crows quarreling while flying high over a house, he will be reminded of the belief that either the husband or the wife in that house will die soon. If he sees a crow pass in front of him from right to left, he will consider it a good omen; but if from left to right, he will expect bad luck. Should a rabbit or snake be in the path ahead, the peasant knows he must walk on in a straight line; should the road turn to the right or left, then the individual had better return home and start the journey the following day.

A spider walking on you will bring good luck, but if you come upon two snakes fighting and eating each other, a close relation of yours will die. Should you be a shepherd in the Vardousia Mountains of Central Greece, you would probably believe that the wild goats which graze in herds are guarded by the devil and that is why one can hear them make a whistling noise. Furthermore, these wild goats have the same notches cut in their ears as the tame ones kept by the shepherds, which to these mountaineers is proof positive that the devil must be the one who puts the markings there.

Seeing some insect or animal may bring to mind a story learned when a child. The bee, for instance, was once as white as cotton. When Adam and Eve met the devil in the Garden of Eden, it was the bee that saw them first and flew immediately to tell God the news. The devil, who was then holding a burning torch in his hand, ran and tried to catch the bee to keep her from her mission. He could not reach her, but as she was nearing God the devil from afar threw the flaming torch at her. The fire singed her so that she became black. God, who saw all of this, ordered the human beings to burn in the churches only the candles made from beeswax since the bee had proven to be the purest creature of all. I am often asked if these folk beliefs (cited here and in later sections of this book) are widely held or are only the relic in the mind of some aged person. It is safe to say that almost all of them are very much alive at the conversational level. People are aware of them, talk about them. Obviously, many act on them, while others do not. But they are a part of the general atmosphere, as is the belief common in America that a person should not walk under a ladder.

Such beliefs, stories, and personal experiences with many kinds of plants and animals reinforce the rural Greek's sense of intimacy with nature, which develops because of his constant exposure to the elements in the course of his daily life. The Greek peasant, like many farmers elsewhere, moves through a living landscape with which he communicates.

The same holds true for his view of the cosmos and the movement of the heavenly bodies.[7] One of the simplest and clearest descriptions of the latter is taken from an account of a village prepared by a singing master in

1:Sanders Z-5H (1952-1959) 1962 EH1 Greece EH1
Peloponneses

221 512 [275] turn; some to hear some news, others to buy a cigarette. Many have their evening meals before and go afterwards.

[241] *Summer.* As soon as *Theristes* [June: the Harvester] begins we start preparing ourselves for harvesting. One looks for an extra workman, others prepare their sickles, we all mix ourselves into the harvest tasks. Nobody remains at home. The children come and help too in the carrying. During summertime school is closed. They have their examinations in the presence [876] of the entire village; they recite poems and give dramatic sketches. This is done on a Sunday after church inside the school.

[241] When we have good harvests we start threshing; then we winnow; then we sack the wheat and put it in our storerooms. The straw we carry into our storage huts. After these jobs are finished we go to the mountains to cut wood and we water the maize. During summer the big festival of St. 221 Elias takes place. All the village is in an upheaval. When we have returned 796 from the Church of St. Elias we all start dancing and are merry. Lots of 535 people come from other villages. The musicians play all day and night. During the summer evenings under the moonlight the women gather with the girls and the children on the threshing floors, in courtyards, and wherever there is an opening. And they "nightspin." There they sing songs, tell jokes, ask riddles, say tongue twisters. The small children and girls play all kinds of games and end with dancing.

Fall. As fall starts, the big festival of Panagia, the 8th of *Trygetes* [September: the Grape Gatherer] comes. The dance and merriment last until dawn. Music does not stop for one minute. After our festival follows that 221 of Mazeika [a nearby town]. There we buy what we need: livestock, wool, 241 clothes, equipment for the house, agricultural implements, and whatever else. But in order to buy we have to sell. For that reason we sell walnuts [438] and wheat. What else can we sell? We haven't got anything. The walnuts [432] we gathered before the festival. When the festival has come to an end we start our work again. Then we gather our beans, we pick our grapes, we [273] press them, we put our wines to ferment, harvest our maize and husk it and place it in wooden cases, and we get ready to sow our wheat. We prepare our agricultural equipment and our seed and we wait for rain. When it has rained we start sowing up to Christmas. In fall also we open our wines [273] and down there in our basement a great merriment goes on.

221 The life in our village is all work and a hard lot. If God wants us and our animals to eat we do so; if it rains we will sow; if there is *Livas* [hot 82 south wind] our crops are scorched; if God throws sickness on our vineyards we do not eat grapes; if the grasshopper comes we have a disaster; if we have little water during the summer our maize doesn't grow. God is regulating our lives, and if you dare 4o, don't believe in Him and don't

1:Sanders Z-5,4 (1952-1959) 1962 EH1 Greece EH1

bow to Him. Our tasks are heavy ones and most of the time we live a miserable life. What holds us in life is when we come back at night to our homes and we find our children. What holds us are our festivals, our customs, our holidays, the joys of our children and the love we bear our animals, our birthplace where we have also grown up. To drink water and to eat bread here is better than all the goods we find in the cities. Here we pass each season differently. It is different in winter, different in summer, and different in spring and fall.[1]

Yannes Needs a Horse; Alekos Buys a Tractor

To work their land to get their bread, the peasants need tools and equipment, draft power and seeds. I had not fully realized the severe limitations under which most Greek peasants tried to carry on in the early 1950s until I talked to Yannes in the shade of a tree just outside of Alistrate (in Macedonia). Yannes, aged twenty-nine years and dressed like most peasants of that area in brown shapeless garments, quickly came over to start a conversation with us when he saw the car come to a stop. During the few preliminaries he played with his small mustache and finally asked:

Did you see me standing over there? It's not because I don't want to work. My animal is there in the team of the man plowing in that field below. He uses mine while he does his work and then I use his animal when I do my plowing. I have my own fields in 13 plots. This man using my horse works on shares; the owner of the field in which he is plowing is a tobacco commission merchant who has altogether 25 acres of good land. The owner in 1950 got 125,000 drachmas [$8,333] to build a poultry house from the government but we haven't seen a sign of a poultry house around here. Had that money been given to the people of Alistrate to get farm animals then we all would have been much better off. Five years ago 200 of us petitioned the Agricultural Bank for draft animals but only 6 people got any.

We did not challenge his poultry-house figure or try to dispel the deep gloom in which he was immersed. But we were willing to listen. He complained about the way American aid was being spent but, when pressed for details, said that this was his impression because "he couldn't see anything being done." Perhaps those who travel around, he pointed out, might see factories going up, dams being built, but he and his people did not believe it because they had nothing tangible, such as animals or equipment. Reflecting the peasants' attitude toward urban life, he said, "Money is for the cities." During the long wait in the refreshing shade, Yannes talked about his family.

"I have eight members in my family. Now we have only yogurt thinned with water for these eight people to eat. For forty-three months I was a soldier and came home thinking things would be better, but the Bulgarians

1:Sanders Z-5,t (1952-1959) 1962 EH1 Greece EH1

178 cal life. Traditionally, the peasant was interested in visible benefits from
184 the government: a bridge, an all-weather road, a new school building, a
369 better priest, or a drainage project. But the farmer moves in his thinking
665 from concentration on single projects to the more confused level of gov-
829 ernmental policies. He has learned that such policies affect him just as definitely as some local measure, and he reacts accordingly. In some countries, peasant parties arise, chiefly under the instigation and leadership of urban intellectuals who see a discontented segment to weld into a political force. Such movements help transform the apolitical peasant into a partisan, a condition which increases his acceptance of the traits of the modern farmer.

184 One could continue the listing of these traits, one set characterizing the
178 peasant at one extreme and the commercial farmer at the other extreme.
●82 Perhaps it will suffice to conclude with a brief examination of some of the less tangible and noneconomic consequences of shifting from a peasant to a farmer.

The first of these is a new attitude toward nature. The peasant, depending upon the philosophical tradition of which he is a part, may submit and resign himself to the vagaries of nature, or he may actively adjust, fighting flood and drought as best he can. With the technology available to him, however, he is at a great disadvantage. The farmer, on the other hand, has moved toward an attitude of mastery over nature, although he never completely approaches this. It is more than a partnership since the farmer is constantly trying to do something to nature: fertilize the soil, put up trees as shelter belts, tile a field to give proper drainage, spray crops to kill insects and eliminate plant disease, and apply contour plowing.

178 A second subtle, though no less real, attitudinal change deals with the
184 growth of individualism. This occurs as the young people tend to liberate
156 themselves, in some ways at least, from the authority of their parents. They begin to express their own personalities, to stand on their own feet, not as a reflection of a family group but as individuals in their own right. It also means that a farmer, in determining a new course of action, is much less inclined than the peasant to wonder what the neighbors would think; instead, he tries to calculate the economic return, the saving in labor, or the greater productivity. Peasants know that if they depart too far from the accepted practice, they are considered disruptive and may wake up one morning to find their haystack burned down as a sign that they had better conform. The open-field system and communal nature of much of peasant life leaves little room for too many exceptions to the general rule. On the other hand, when local villagers have been persuaded that a new practice is desirable, it can be carried out much more quickly and effectively than if every family head had to be contacted as a separate individual. The informal channels of communication in a village are amazingly fast and,

2:Friedl E-5 (1955-1959)1963 EH1 Greece EH1
Vasilika

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Human Relations[1]

Attitudes Toward Man and Nature

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IF IT WERE NECESSARY to describe the nature of the villagers' feelings with respect to each other and the world in one word, that word would be "tension." Indeed, in the first chapter, the metaphor of Vasilika as a setting for a series of family dramas was used. The metaphor has a special aptness because it hints at the essential quality of drama—tension created by some kind of struggle. John Peristiany speaks of the agonistic quality of relationships among the Cypriot villagers he knows—agonistic in the sense of the ancient Greek word *agon* (match or struggle). This word is equally useful for Vasilika, although the contests do not appear to have quite the intensity of those described for Cyprus. Nevertheless, in Vasilika, when one walks through the fields and asks how the work is going, the common response is *"Palevume,"* "We are wrestling." Such an answer is not a cliché in which the literal meaning is lost. The villagers can amplify with further comments on their perpetual contest with soil, weather, and machinery. Man does not always win, in their view, but he is obligated to do his best and to use skill in the struggle. In contemporary Vasilika, the skill involves knowledge of naturally efficient means, and anyone who does not do his best in this sense is unintelligent and deserves to lose the battle. Those who try may still fail, and then the villagers turn to fate or to God's will as an explanation. But an appeal to fate or to God is never an excuse for neglecting actions which are humanly possible, and sometimes this is overtly expressed. For example, one farmer, at a time of unseasonable drought, remarked as he looked at his tobacco fields, "I won't make the sign of the cross, I'll bring my pump over here and irrigate the field." His intent was not blasphemous; he was not an irreligious man from the standpoint of village beliefs and practices. Rather, the farmer was expressing an explicit attitude in

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[1] Lee (1953) is especially relevant to this chapter, and is strongly recommended for further discussion.

2: Friedl E-5 (1955-1959) 963 EH1 Greece EH1
Vasilika

village culture: man must use human means toward human ends, and this is his first obligation not only to himself but to God.

In Vasilika, the same tension—the sense of a contest, of struggle, of agony, of a kind of pushing and pulling—is also a feature of a large number of encounters with other human beings. In earlier discussions I referred to the economic rivalries among families in the village and to the efforts to keep family activities private to the point where a kind of espionage is practiced by all the villagers to uncover secrets. These contests we may now understand as one manifestation of the agonistic quality of many human relationships within the village. But seemingly perpetual battles require an occasional respite; the nervous vitality which they drain must be replenished. In Vasilika, some relationships within the family seem to contribute the respite and the energy to go on fighting the battles, whereas others appear to create the sense that perpetual struggle, principally outside the family, is a part of life. The family both starts the battle and also manufactures and distributes the weapons with which to fight it.

What is the ultimate aim of the battle, if I may continue the metaphor? It would seem that each man and woman seeks for identity, for a concept of self, and given the conditions of Greek village culture and its values, the search is carried on by pitting oneself against another, or against fate. One learns to know oneself primarily by contrast with others; and therefore the maintenance of some difference is a necessity. Contrasts, and the tension contrasts create, become expected and desired. Without change and variation the villagers lose their sense of life. But the need to engage in perptual struggle is an emotional burden, especially because there must be some who lose in the contests. A man is not completely disgraced in the villagers' view, however, if he is bested in an encounter with another man, provided that he was willing to engage himself in the struggle in the first place and showed skill in his conduct of it. Just as agricultural failure is attributable to uncontrollable forces only if a man did his physical best, so failure in human relations is attributable to some other force only if a man has first made a creditable effort. It would seem that it is not the outcome but the continuing *aghonia* that gives a village man or woman the feeling that he is a functioning human being, that he has an identity, that he is alive. *"Perazmena, ksehazmena,"* "What is past is forgotten," the villagers say, and although they say so mostly in connection with unpleasantness, the saying is equally applicable to victories. For both victory and defeat are shortlived; a new area of battle constantly supersedes the old.

This struggle is not something which is entered into as a new pattern when men and women take on the responsibilities of a family, after a childhood spent without it. On the contrary, Vasilika's culture is one of those in which there is a continuity in the behavior and attitudes expected of children, adolescents, and adults. There are no sharp breaks; from their earliest days the upbringing of children plunges them into the role of agonist, and skills for functioning in this fashion are acquired in all stages of a child's development.

The villagers assume that intelligence and self-control are basic human qualities which differentiate men from animals. The villagers are in many ways